



FEAR AND PANIC HAS GRIPPED THE NORTHERN INDIAN TOWN OF JOSHIMATH, WHERE A GEOLOGICAL CONDITION CALLED LAND SUBSIDENCE IS CAUSING THE LAND TO SPLIT OPEN AND SINK INTO THE GROUND. ALL PHOTOS: VIJAY PANDEY

## VICE News

# 'It's the Apocalypse': Thousands Flee As This Holy Himalayan Town Sinks Into the Ground

Despite warnings, construction in this popular mountain town, to accommodate Hindu pilgrims, ski tourists, and hydropower plants, has been relentless.



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JAKARTA, ID

VP

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“It sounded like sandpaper rubbing against each other,” Baba Santosh, a Hindu priest in his 50s, told VICE World News in early January, the snow-capped Himalayas surrounding him. “Then the sound got louder.”

Santosh’s ashram started shaking on Jan. 2 in Joshimath, a small Himalayan town in India close to the Chinese border. Within seconds, thick cracks appeared on its walls and the wooden front door contorted from its hinges. Then the door burst open and, terrified, the priests ran out.

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“In one room, the floor just caved in and I could hear ground water gurgling underneath,” Santosh said.

By the time the sound stopped, their home was a pile of gravel and the priests were forced to spend the night outside in subzero temperatures. The next morning, they realised the whole town of over 20,000 people were out on the streets too.



BABA SANTOSH STANDS OUTSIDE A DILAPIDATED HOUSE NEAR HIS ASHRAM IN JOSHIMATH.

“Earthquakes and cracks on walls are normal in the mountains. We’re used to it,” said Santosh, as dark clouds rumbled in the sky above. Behind him, a small temple is broken to pieces. “But I’ve never seen anything like this before. This isn’t normal. It’s the apocalypse.”

Technically, Joshimath, a town 6,000 feet above sea level, is sinking into the ground.

Experts have been warning for decades that Joshimath is in a high-risk seismic zone and prone to land subsidence—when the earth moves vertically downwards—but construction in this popular holy town, surrounded by glaciers, to accommodate pilgrims, ski tourists, and hydropower plants, has been relentless. The town saw close to half a million visitors in 2019.

Joshimath is not alone. It’s among over 500 towns and villages in Uttarakhand state that’s in the land

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Chamoli district, where Joshimath is located, currently has 52 hydropower stations that have either been constructed or are under construction. Joshimath's state Uttarakhand is home to 900 glaciers covering roughly 2,857 square kilometres. The glaciers are retreating at an alarming pace due to warming temperatures, and the government has its eye on them to meet India's growing electricity needs. Last year, at a rally, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that development projects in Uttarakhand are one of his top priorities.

**Joshimath is not alone. It's among over 500 towns and villages in Uttarakhand state that's in the land subsidence zone.**

Local authorities finally declared Joshimath disaster-prone last week and called disaster management and technical teams to assess the unfolding devastation. Many residents packed up their belongings and over 3,000 were moved into relief camps.

NDTV caught drilling activity related to a hydropower plant at 2AM just outside Joshimath. The state government also still plans to go forward with holy and sporting events that will bring thousands of tourists to the area.

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“We are going to have the National Winter Games in [Joshimath’s neighbouring town] Auli in February,” Pushkar Singh Dhami, the state’s chief minister, told reporters in Joshimath last week. He added that a popular religious procession that hits Joshimath will also go forward. This ancient town is a key part of the country’s lucrative Hindu tourism circuit called Char Dham Yatra (Hindi for ‘Four Abodes Pilgrimage’).



JAYANTI DEVI, A RESIDENT, CRIES AFTER MOVING OUT OF HER HOME THAT DEVELOPED CRACKS EARLY THIS MONTH.

Contrary to the state leader’s views, there’s panic on the ground. Among locals, there is constant talk of an ancient Hindu prophecy that Joshimath will, one day, become completely inaccessible.

“Man has messed with nature too much,” said Santosh, the priest. “One of these days, the whole town is going to wash away down this slope like a big glacial flood.”

**T**he unfolding disaster, which appears to have caught the local authorities by surprise, is preceded by decades-old warnings.

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change plays a role in intensifying landslides, earthquakes and high-altitude and deadly flash floods.

The earliest geological observation of Joshimath was as far back as 1936, when Swiss geologists Arnold Heim and August Gansser warned in their book that Joshimath is built over an ancient landslide making it inherently unstable.



A SATELLITE IMAGE, PROVIDED BY A US EARTH IMAGING COMPANY, SHOWS JOSHIMATH'S LANDSCAPE AND THE PRECARIOUS SLOPE IT'S CONSTRUCTED UPON. IMAGE: PLANET LABS PBC

“Over 50 percent of Himalayan villages and towns are settled on such ancient landslides,” Saraswati Prakash Sati, a geologist who studies Uttarakhand’s Himalayas, told VICE World News. Sati attributes a big part of Himalayan instability to unhindered development activities and terrain-insensitive constructions.

“In the olden days, technologies and homes were built according to the terrain, which is why some of these structures can withstand big

fragility of Joshimath will be exacerbated by construction activities and population pressures. But over the years, big-budget projects have cropped up, including Modi's \$1.5-billion Char Dham Highway Development Project that will widen the roads in the landslide-prone state to link Hindu holy sites and the Char Dham Railway Project, estimated to cost nearly \$2 billion.

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The region has reported big disasters in recent years. In 2021, an avalanche made up of snow, ice and rocks flooded Chamoli district, killed over 200 people and washed away a key hydropower plant. In 2013, a "Himalayan tsunami" caused by a cloudburst in Kedarnath, just a few kilometres away from Joshimath, killed over 5,700 people.





EXPERTS HAVE WARNED THAT RAPID URBANISATION IN THIS TOWN OF JUST 20,000 PEOPLE HAS ADDED PRESSURES ON JOSHIMATH.

Experts like Sati say that these disasters reactivate volatile slopes like Joshimath.

A village called Raini reported land subsidence following the 2021 Chamoli disaster, after which geologists declared the village unliveable. In 2021, yet another report came about Joshimath, this time authored by scientists including Sati, who documented the cracks in people's homes and reiterated old warnings.

These scientific reports were backed by protests from locals over the years. "We staged protests. We blocked the roads," Atul Sati, an activist and convenor of a grassroots movement called Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti (Save Joshimath Committee), told VICE World News.

"We warned this day would come, but nobody listened. We prepared reports, memorandums and recommendations. We met the chief minister. Nothing happened."

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**A**t the centre of Joshimath's anguish is the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), one of the biggest energy conglomerates in India, which runs hydroelectric power projects across the Himalayas, including near Joshimath.

**“We warned this day would come, but nobody listened.”**

Dozens of residents VICE World News spoke to blame the NTPC for digging tunnels around the town to build the \$364-million Tapovan Vishnugad Hydro Electric Project, intended to supply electricity across the state. As of now, the project is 70 percent complete with a new anticipated cost of \$868 million.

Residents say that the 12-kilometre tunnel NTPC dug just over a kilometre away involves frequent construction explosions. “We’ve been hearing these blasts for years,” said Pandey, a local resident, whose deteriorating house is located very close to the NTPC tunnel. “These sounds come from right above us. Today, the impact is right here in front of you. These floors look like a bomb exploded underground.”

“This land is not made for so much development,” said Santosh, the priest. “The authorities have to investigate these development projects to see if



A HYDROELECTRIC POWER PROJECT BY NATIONAL THERMAL POWER CORPORATION, A BIG ENERGY CONGLOMERATE IN INDIA, HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF JOSHIMATH'S DEVASTATION.

A 2015 study by international geologists, seen by VICE World News, incorporates data provided by NTPC Ltd itself and found that the power project has changed the hydraulic properties of the region’s rock mass through their drill and blast methods and specifically because of three “trapping events”—when a boring machine gets stuck inside a tunnel—over the years.

In 2021, two residents of Joshimath were among five petitioners who approached the Uttarakhand high court asking to ban blasting, stone crushing and mining activities near the town. The high court dismissed their petition claiming it’s “highly motivated” and called the petitioners “merely puppets at the hand of an unknown puppeteer.”

Protests against power projects have been reported in Uttarakhand for years for reasons other than land subsidence. In 2008, construction of a dam—India’s tallest, and world’s 12th tallest—as part of a massive hydroelectric power plant in Uttarakhand’s Tehri district went ahead despite protests since the 1960s. It submerged 37 villages and displaced 33 million people. Environmental concerns in the region are often dismissed as “anti-development” activism.

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**“Building anything on this land is like making a house on a mound of sand.”**

"The tunnel is at a horizontal distance of around 1.1 kilometre away from the outer boundary of Joshimath town and vertically around 1.1 kilometre below the ground level," the letter said, adding that the tunnel boring machine "causes no disturbance to the surrounding rock mass." The report also claims there are no signs of sinking around the tunnel.



DRIVE ACROSS UTTARAKHAND STATE'S HIMALAYAS SHOWS CRANES SMASHING INTO THE MOUNTAINS AS PART OF THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT'S BIG-BUDGET DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS, WHICH INCLUDES ROAD WIDENING.

The letter further said that Joshimath's problem is "an old issue" and has got more to do with its inherent geological problems of "hill wash, natural angle of the repose, cultivation area because of seepage and soil erosion."

media interview this week, not NTPC’s.

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Over the weekend, a preliminary report, released by the prestigious Indian Space Research Organisation, captured national attention and went viral for stating that Joshimath saw “rapid subsistence” of 5 cm in 12 days since Dec. 27. It was subsequently gagged by the government for creating “panic”.

For now, local communities have escalated their protests and now demand complete cancellation of the NTPC project, irrespective of its construction status, and have called for fines to the tune of \$2.4 billion, which they say should be distributed to the displaced locals. On Jan. 26, when India marks its 74th Republic Day, Joshimath residents have also planned a “Go Back NTPC” protest across the town.



A RESIDENT CALLED FUNTI DEVI SHOWS CRACKS OUTSIDE HER HOUSE IN JOSHIMATH.

Atul claims that despite the terror the ongoing events have instilled in the town, the NTPC is continuing their construction, despite a ban on all construction activities in and around the town.

“If these guys are violating the laws, they should be investigated. But that’s not happening,” said Atul.

**J**oshimath isn’t the first Himalayan town to go down like this. VICE World News travelled to Chaien village, around 14 kilometers from Joshimath, parts of which completely sank about a decade ago.

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another hydroelectric power project, the Vishnuprayag Hydro-electric Project, owned by a subsidiary of conglomerate JayPee Group. Work on the project started in 1999, and in 2007, the power project reported a massive leak which inundated the village.

Residents of this village blame the project for land subsidence on their land, which led to homes developing cracks, floors collapsing, and families completely displaced. One part of the town is currently still underground.



VIJENDER SINGH PAWAR, THE CHIEF OF VILLAGE CHAEIN, JUST 14 KMS FROM JOSHIMATH, SHOWS WHAT THE PROMISES OF DEVELOPMENT ARE CAPABLE OF.

Much of the Chaein village has been rebuilt now, but new cracks are still appearing in homes. The ground is soft when one walks on it, and in several areas, water gushes out like an unrepaired leak.



We're hearing blastings in tunnels even now. Sometimes, rocks fall from above the hill and smash our roofs."

Incidentally, Chaein villagers who fled from their village to settle down in a "safer" Joshimath years ago are now packing up to come back. "We would offer a home to Joshimath, but how do we do that when we're still not safe?" said Pawar.

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Chaein villagers are also travelling to Joshimath to give their support. There are [calls by environmentalists for Uttarakhand's villages](#) to unite against development projects.

"We were displaced, we protested in the freezing cold, slept in the open and protested for years but nothing happened," Yashodha Devi, a Chaein resident in her 80s, told VICE World News. "But we're with Joshimath because if we all stand together and fight together, the authorities will feel the pressure."

Many towns and villages across Uttarakhand are also reporting cracks now. In a village called Marora just

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buildings.

Despite the ongoing tragedy and ever-present danger, some old inhabitants of Joshimath are reluctant to leave.

Santosh, the priest, said he is the only one remaining in his side of the town. "I will jump off my roof if the cracks come for me. I'm not leaving," he said.



NEARLY 800 BUILDINGS IN JOSHIMATH – LIKE THESE TWO HOTELS LEANING INTO EACH OTHER – HAVE BEEN MARKED UNLIVEABLE, BUT MANY RESIDENTS SAY THEY'RE RELUCTANT TO LEAVE.

Roshni Devi, a 30-year-old woman said she won't leave until she's physically pushed out of her home by the authorities. "There's way too many memories, too many belongings to leave behind," she said.

But Sati, the geologist, said it's too late to save Joshimath now. The authorities, instead, should prioritise mass evacuations and resettlement of the people.

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*Follow Pallavi Pundir on [Twitter](#).*

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